

# A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO SEVEN FALLEN FEATHERS

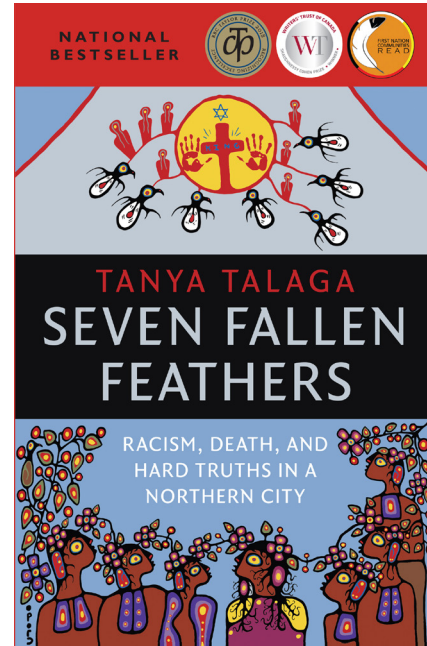
Written by Tanya Talaga

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Seven Fallen Feathers examines the death of seven Indigenous high school students in Thunder Bay, Ontario, during the period of 2000 to 2011. All seven students were from remote northern reserves where they were forced to leave their homes and families to pursue a high school education in Thunder Bay. The author focuses the narrative on the lives of the students and the circumstances surrounding their deaths and the investigative responses. Tanya Talaga examines the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and the current state of race relations and human rights in the northern city Thunder Bay.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tanya Talaga is the acclaimed author of *Seven Fallen Feathers*, which was the winner of the RBC Taylor Prize, the Shaughnessy Cohen Prize for Political Writing, and the First Nation Communities Read: Young Adult/Adult Award; a finalist for the Hilary Weston Writers' Trust Nonfiction Prize and the BC National Award for Nonfiction; CBC's Nonfiction Book of the Year, a Globe and Mail Top 100 Book, and a national bestseller. For more than twenty years Talaga has been a journalist at the *Toronto Star*, and she has been nominated five times for the Michener Award in public service journalism. She was also named the 2017–2018 Atkinson Fellow in Public Policy. Talaga is of Polish and Indigenous descent. Her great-grandmother Liz Gauthier was a residential school survivor. Her great-grandfather Russell Bowen was an Ojibwe trapper and laborer. Her grandmother is a member of Fort William First Nation. Her mother was raised in Raith and Graham, Ontario. She lives in Toronto with her two teenage children.



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## THIS BOOK EXPLORES THE THEMES AND TOPICS OF:

- Colonialism
- Westward expansion
- Cultural genocide
- Residential schools
- Racism
- The Indian Act
- Traditional Indigenous territories
- Indigenous stories/culture
- Indigenous education
- The reserve system in Canada
- Human rights of Indigenous Peoples in Canada
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## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

English; Indigenous Studies, Civics and Careers, History, World Views, Humanities and Social Sciences, Anthropology, Health Management, Geography, Visual Arts

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## IDEAS FOR GETTING STARTED

- Introduce the book, its author, and the themes and topics the book will be exploring. Explain that although the book is non-fiction, the themes and topics are difficult and can evoke strong emotional and physical reactions in individuals. With this in mind, have the class create group norms around discussion, writing, and exploration time. These can include listening without interrupting when someone is speaking, respecting all views, using positive language to comment on one another's ideas and/or opinions, etc.
- Consider introducing the concept of an Indigenous talking circle for discussion about the book. A talking circle is a space where participants can feel free to speak without censure or to remain silent. There is usually an object (i.e., a talking stick) that is passed around the circle. Only the person with the talking stick may speak, and all others must remain silent. The circle can be used for discussion topics or at times when healing or understanding are needed. It is a safe space where sharing feelings and experiences is welcomed.
- As a class, or in small groups, have students investigate the traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples and the modern-day reserve system. Have each group conduct a mini research project on one of the reserves that the students in the book came from (Webequie, Kasabonika Lake, Pikangikum, Mishkeegogamang, Keewaywin, Poplar Hill, North Caribou Lake, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwug).

### **Curricular Connections: Geography, Civics and Careers (Treaties), Canadian History, Indigenous Studies**

- As a class, examine the Indian Act and the provisions for the education of Indigenous children within it. Compare and contrast this with: 1) the 145 recommendations from the coroner's inquest into the First Nations students' deaths in Thunder Bay; 2) the January 26, 2016, Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's recommendations regarding the education and child welfare of Indigenous children; and 3) the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations on education.

### **Curricular Connections: Indigenous Studies, Canadian History, Civics and Careers (Treaties, Indian Act)**

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## IDEAS FOR GETTING STARTED

- In small groups or as individuals, have students investigate the three cultural stories presented in the beginning of the book (the prophecy of the Seven Fires, Turtle Island, and Nanabijou/Sleeping Giant). Students can prepare artistic or visual mapping of the stories and their representation in today's society and present them in class.

### **Curricular Connections: Visual Arts, Indigenous Studies**

- As a class, investigate the maps provided in the front of the book. Explore the Indigenous and colonial history of the city and region, including language, culture, economics, industry, art, governance, and/or transportation. Identify political and law enforcement organizations in the city and region and examine their role in governance. (Some examples are Nishnawbe Aski Nation [NAN], NAN Police Service, Matawa First Nations Management, City of Thunder Bay, Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada [INAC], Tribal Councils, Thunder Bay Police Service, Fort William First Nation, Northern Nishnawbe Education Council [NNEC], and Ontario Provincial Police [OPP].)

### **Curricular Connections: Civics and Careers, Indigenous Studies, Police Foundations, Government**

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## TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACHES

- Read the book as a class, incorporating small group or class discussions during and at the end of each chapter. You could use a combination of teacher read-aloud and independent reading. Have students complete a culminating activity after you have finished the book. (Ideas for culminating activities are suggested at the end of this study guide.)
- Have students read the book independently and create their own independent study project.
- Assign groups of students one chapter each and have them read it and present it to the rest of the class.
- Have students read the book in groups and then either collaborate on a culminating activity or complete it independently.

# A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO SEVEN FALLEN FEATHERS

## IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

- Have students create a definition for “cultural genocide.” How is it similar to / different from genocide? Do they amount to the same thing in the end? Give evidence as to why or why not.
- How has the residential school system contributed to the education situation of Indigenous children and communities today? In what ways can the trauma of residential schools be related to the deaths of the seven (plus two) Indigenous children in Thunder Bay? Provide evidence to support your answer.

### **Curricular Connections: Health, Civics and Careers**

- Explore racism. In what ways is racism overtly represented in the book? How is racism covertly represented? What is the difference between individual racism and systemic racism? Give examples of each from the book.
- Indigenous spirituality and cultural belief systems play a significant part in the book’s representation of the communities, the search for the children, and the present-day relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (the notes from a blind man, the prophecy of the Seven Fires, etc.). How are these different than western spirituality and cultural belief systems? In what ways are they similar? How does the fact that western belief systems dominate the culture affect the way in which the cases were investigated and leads followed?

### **Curricular Connections: Indigenous Studies, Anthropology**

- Discuss the following quote: “The loss of Daniel and the loss of the seven represented the loss of hope, the failure of one generation to take care of the next. Their disappearances and deaths signified everything wrong in the relationship between Canada and the Indigenous people.” (page 22)

### **Curricular Connections: Civics and Careers, Indigenous Studies, Canadian History**

# A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO SEVEN FALLEN FEATHERS

## IDEAS FOR DISCUSSION

- Read as a group the description of the initial events in the disappearance of Jordan Wabasse (pages 32–35). Discuss the following questions: Why do you believe the police approached the case in the way that they did? What do you believe led to the ambivalence of the police? Can it be considered malfeasance?
- Read and discuss the “rules” for incoming Dennis Franklin Cromarty students on page 98. How would these look similar or different in your community?
- Read the passages on pages 137–139 detailing the conditions in Pikangikum First Nation. What descriptor would you use for these living conditions? Why? Examine the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. How do the conditions in Pikangikum compare with the edicts in the code? How should the federal government address these conditions?

### **Curricular Connections: Geography, Indigenous Studies, Civics and Careers, World Studies**

- Read the passages on pages 161–163 about the disappearance of Maryanne Panacheese’s sister Sarah. Have students research and investigate the history and current state of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Discuss how the treatment of the cases of the MMIWG and the treatment of the cases of the Seven Fallen Feathers are similar. Do you believe there are differences in how these cases were investigated and how cases involving non-Indigenous people are investigated?
- Read the federal government’s apology for residential schools on page 239. Examine the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal’s (CHRT) 2016 recommendations regarding Indigenous children’s education, and the inquest’s 145 recommendations on the education of Northwestern Ontario’s Indigenous children. Where is Canada today in terms of the apology and both sets of recommendations? Why?

### **Curricular Connections: Geography, World Studies, Indigenous Studies, Civics and Careers (Canadian Government)**

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## IDEAS FOR CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

- Examine with students the painting represented on the cover of the book. Have them complete an artistic analysis of the painting (style, materials, representations, symbolism, artist, tradition). Have students present their analysis through a presentation to the class.

### **Curricular Connections: Art, Visual Arts, Art History, English, Indigenous World Views, Anthropology, History, and Social Sciences**

- Ask students to prepare a comparative analysis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal's 2016 recommendations on Indigenous peoples in Canada, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations, and the report of the Thunder Bay inquest into the deaths of seven First Nations students, and to prepare a presentation of the analysis and current state of the recommendations of each.

### **Curricular Connections: English, Indigenous World Views, History, Civics and Careers, Geography, Anthropology, Law**

- Students can explore the theme of racism in the book through an image collage. They can use mixed media, drawings, photos, videos, etc. They can prepare a presentation on the collage based on the images they chose and the explanations for them.

### **Curricular Connections: Visual Arts, Social Sciences, Psychology, Civics and Careers, History, English**

- On page 192, it states that the motto of the Office of the Chief Coroner is, "We speak for the dead to protect the living." Students can prepare an opinion paper on the effectiveness of this motto in the deaths of the seven Indigenous youths in the book. They should use evidence from the text as well as other examples of coroner's investigations.

### **Curricular Connections: English, Government, Law, Civics and Careers**



# A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO SEVEN FALLEN FEATHERS

## IDEAS FOR CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

- Students can examine and compare, independently or in small groups, the provincial education system and funding model, and the federal Indigenous education system and funding model. They can prepare a presentation for classmates (oral, digital, or visual) that details the similarities, differences, histories, and deficiencies of the systems. Students should comment on how these factors figure prominently in the deaths of the seven Indigenous youths in Thunder Bay.

**Curricular Connections: English, Indigenous World Views, Civics and Careers, History, Social Sciences, Government, Law**

- Alcohol was a factor in several of the deaths of the seven youths. Students can conduct a research project on the roots of alcoholism in Indigenous communities, its relationship to mental health and trauma, biological consequences of alcoholism, and its relationship to the overall state of healthcare and nutrition in reserve communities. They can present their research to the class in a chosen format (conference paper, PowerPoint, newscast, etc.).

**Curricular Connections: English, Health, Indigenous Studies, Media Studies, History, Civics and Careers, Government, Psychology, Social Sciences**

- Students can research the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendations for Canada to move forward with reconciliation. They can design their own plan for action, in a city like Thunder Bay and within the education system, for addressing the issues and circumstances that led to the deaths of the seven Indigenous youths. How and where would they begin a plan? What would be the critical elements? What actions would they — the city government, provincial government, tribal governments, and federal government — take? Students should present their plan to the class.

**Curricular Connections: Government, English, History, Civics and Careers, Economics, Anthropology**

# A TEACHERS' GUIDE TO SEVEN FALLEN FEATHERS

## IDEAS FOR CULMINATING ACTIVITIES

- Students can explore racism in their own communities. Are there examples of covert and overt racism? Are there similar situations or circumstances within their own communities? How did these issues arise? Are there examples of systemic racism and, if so, what are they? Students can then present their own findings in a similar manner as the author — through stories or accounts in a journalistic manner.

**Curricular Connections: English, History, Anthropology, Geography, World Studies, Social Sciences, Psychology**